



Mondays with DAVID ALLAN



A winter holiday, slightly more extreme than most.

Have a Break? Winter benefits for all?

I received a call on Saturday from someone (in the UK) who had watched a race at Kenilworth that afternoon. The filly that he had gone on line to watch finished near the back – along with several well fancied runners – and had clearly been eased when beaten. Only one favourite – a 2 year old - won all day.

My friend wondered about the ground conditions, not being able to see clearly on screen. I was able to report that the filly had "hated the ground". Marks in the turf right across the track from previous races showed that there was still cut.

"Why do you race in the SA winter anyway?" came the question, not criticising the ground which was nowhere near as "Soft" as often in the European turf season, but noting the time of year.

Adjusting for the 7 month difference northern and southern hemisphere, July in South Africa is the equivalent of December in UK when there would be no flat turf racing going on at all.

Any self-respecting racehorse, about to celebrate his or her official birthday, would be on a farm or at a spelling establishment in a thoroughly woolly state or trace-clipped and blanketed, turned out for some or much of the day depending on the weather and "getting his/her head down".

The benefits of so doing include stretching neck and back muscle and other soft tissue that becomes cramped and squeezed and otherwise tweaked during time under tack with a human quite often sitting up there. No matter how low a rider keeps the hands, or how well the tack distributes weight – or riders avoid bouncing on the back – a break from all of that does the equine mind and body good.

Aside from winter racing on polytrack which has its place, albeit a very chilly and generally lowly one, the normal pattern is for a horse to be finishing as the turf season finishes end October/early November (May/June in SA) , not to return to the track until six months later.

Unless a boisterous colt, not to be gelded and best kept in, the horse will usually go on holiday as soon as possible. The owner will save money in costs, often at a spelling place designated by or familiar to the trainer who will keep an eye. **(to page 2)**



Sandown Park - high entrance charges reflect relatively infrequent use.

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The break may be for all of November and December (June and July SA equivalent) plus or minus.

During that time, a trainer will always have some "in" maybe for polytrack racing or other particular reasons (and for some cash flow) and will get him or herself and family and staff off on holiday through that time rather than in high season – much the same as a hotel or restaurant manager will try to get staff off in low not high season.

Christmas helps that process in the north. Having fewer horses "in" means that more staff can get away for the main days while the remainder cover for them through the holiday period. Some work-riders will go overseas for the UK winter and come back after the New Year.

Soon after 1st January (= 1st August SA) horses come back into training unless needing more time off. In often fierce weather they will be built back up until returning to faster work in March (October SA) or maybe sooner, ready for the start of the Turf.

I tried to answer my friend's question. "We race in the winter in South Africa because we can". It is huge compared to mainstream European racing countries where winter weather is not right for flat turf racing, and UK, Ireland and France concentrate on jump racing through that time anyway.

Winter in some SA racing locations has highly suitable weather, I told him. Whereas in the Western Cape, winter weather can be strongly adverse on occasions and the height of the Cape Season is definitely the height of the summer.

There, Kenilworth has an excellent layout with vari-

ous course options and Durbanville has been excitingly improved in a major investment exercise to the benefit of the sport and industry.

Yet these courses take a lot of "hammer". They are the sum total of the Cape's racing venues. The European equivalent would be to have other tracks at Franschoek, Simon's Town and Langebaan. That is not going to happen.

What a burden – especially in the climate – it must be to keep Kenilworth and Durbanville – even with their planned breaks - as one would wish compared to – say – Sandown Park. That Surrey venue has a grand total of fifteen days flat racing per season, five of which are evening meetings. It is a dual purpose course that has ten days winter jumping as well, although on parallel, concentric hurdle and steeplechase courses. Like Kenilworth, Sandown has a sprint course "down the middle".

The idea of having a complete winter break in (say) the Western Cape for horses and courses would involve much debate. One cannot transpose systems from one country to another, in either direction, when conditions and traditions are so different. The economics of costing and charging are geared to a system.

Horses in the Cape can be given a form of break within training establishments and some do "go off" elsewhere. Some trainers are understandably not keen on seeing them go whether in the context of earnings or hands-on supervision or a risk of them coming back with different habits or aptitudes. However, the notion does highlight perhaps a shortage of spelling and pre-training facilities.

These might be in close association with trainers or indeed – to guard against that other fear: that they won't come back - owned by trainers as secondary, overflow facilities or by an authority as extensions

DAVID ALLAN (cont)

of the training operation. This is a service that ought to provide good and very worthwhile business opportunity as the sport and industry recovers economically. - **tt.**



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